

Representative George French. A key change was the creation of a Police Board, appointed by the General Assembly, with responsibility for the appointment and management of the city's police chief, fire chief, city clerk, treasurer, attorney, physician, harbor master, policemen, and service workers. Three white Republicans—William H. Chadbourn, Frederick Rice, and Silas P. Wright—were appointed to staff the first board alongside Populist John R. Melton and a black Republican, John E. Taylor. The Police Board, through its appointments and responsibilities, made the city's existing Democratic Board of Audit and Finance and Board of Aldermen virtually powerless.¹⁷

Local Democrats, still splintered by factionalism, were ineffectual in their response. Meanwhile, manipulated by Russell from behind the scenes, the new Police Board moved to improve city government and reward Democrats who aided in the Fusionist power grab. At the first meeting, the Police Board financially rewarded some of its members. Rice and Melton immediately submitted their resignations to the board and were subsequently elected to two of the highest paying patronage positions in city government. Rice succeeded a Democrat as city clerk and treasurer, and Melton became the chief of police. In an effort to seek bipartisan support, the Police Board was careful to appoint a few blacks to positions, as well as a good number of Democrats in an attempt to forestall Democrats' efforts to bring the race issue into the 1896 election campaign. Further improving its image, the Police Board established pay scales for employees that were substantially less than those paid by the previous Democratic board. The combination of fiscal management and nonpartisan appointments

resulted in a weaker Democratic Party and dissatisfied African American voters.¹⁸

Not only in Wilmington, but across the state, black voters criticized the Fusionists for what was perceived as discrimination in patronage appointments. A Wilmington paper published an article by a black laborer who wanted more representation in the police and street work forces. Overall, blacks viewed Fusion with skepticism and entertained thoughts of joining forces with Reform Democrats. Because of a potential break within the normally solid Republican Party, Russell sought to remedy the situation before the 1896 election in which he hoped to win the governor's office. Many blacks felt that his actions were more for public display than to effect major change in black patronage placements. As a result, despite Russell's efforts, friction between white and black Republicans continued.¹⁹

With an eye toward preparations for the 1896 elections, Russell counseled Fusionists that if they stumbled after winning in 1894 and if they did not act responsibly then the party would see "repudiation by the white people" and "restoration of the Democratic party to power in the state." He further observed that whites "will not submit to negro rule, or anything that looks like it." In order to placate African American voters, Russell clarified this point by indicating that he did not mean "that the colored man shall not hold offices, but we do say that the office holding must be confined to those who are fit for it and who are friendly to the whites, and to such limits as to show that our local affairs will not be controlled by the colored vote."²⁰

¹⁷ Edmonds, *Negro and Fusion Politics*, 128.

¹⁸ McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 419-422.

¹⁹ McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 422-425

²⁰ Daniel Russell in the *Wilmington Weekly Messenger* August 20, 1894 as cited in McDuffie, "Politics in Wilmington," 420.